

Pastor Kevin Garman
 Theme: Reformation Sunday
 Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
 October 25th, 2020

Reformation Sunday: Reforming Our Hearts

Last week, we concluded our sermon series on Bishop Schnase's book, *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. As we approach the season of Advent, we will not have any specific sermon series, but instead, I will be preaching from the lectionary texts each week. This Sunday we celebrate Reformation Sunday. Celebrating the life and legacy of Martin Luther may seem strange in the United Methodist Church, but the core themes of the Reformation live on today in our theology, practice of our faith, and our interpretations of scripture. Today, we will look at the letter to the Thessalonians from Paul to illustrate some of those core themes.

The church of Thessalonica was in the city of Therma in the Roman province of Macedonia. Therma was a harbor city in the gulf on the coast of the Aegean Sea. It was Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus who originally founded the church of Thessalonica where they formed a community of Jewish and Gentile followers. The First Letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters and most likely the earliest written book of the New Testament. The letter itself is addressed to the Gentile members of the community. These were the members Paul was closest to in his friendship, which is why the First Letter of Thessalonians is so intimate and personal.

The letter addresses a couple of important topics. It would not be a Pauline letter without Paul addressing some form of the coming of the Messiah. This certainly resonates with us as we approach the Advent season in anticipation of the birth of Jesus. Paul also speaks to the difficulties the community faces as they undergo opposition from their neighbors on their new practices and faith. Paul encourages his comrades to remain steadfast in their love for one another, lean on each other in these trying times, and above all, give thanks for the blessings they have received by offering up prayers of thanksgiving and assurance to continue preaching the good news. The section we will focus on today is 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8.

“You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain,² but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.³ For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery,⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.⁵ As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed;⁶ nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others,⁷ though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.⁸ So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us” (NRSV).

Verses 1-4

Paul speaks to the opposition they faced in the city of Philippi. These verses are a recollection of the time they spent forming the church and the opposition they faced in other cities as the Romans did not approve of public assembly as Christians most commonly practiced when preaching the good news. Most likely, this opposition was similar to what we receive when

we gather for social holiness. Every now and then someone will shake their head passing by or wave us off in disagreement, but we are not run out of town with pitchforks and torches. The Romans practiced their faith either publicly in their temples or in private in their homes. It was strange to them to see folks outside in the common squares and marketplaces preaching about the coming of the Messiah and calling out the Empire who had created the poor conditions of the cities they were preaching.

Paul thoughtfully ensures the Thessalonian church to know this is work through faith in God and not his own works. In verse three, Paul wants to make sure the church understands Paul's actions and words come from God and not himself. He speaks through God's word through the teachings of the Gospel and allows the Holy Spirit to fill his heart, actions, and words. Some of those older preachers I listened to growing up would stand up on Sunday morning and say, "This is what the Lord has put on my heart to say this morning. These are not my words, but God's words." Paul's assurance here is that our works in our faith must not come from a place of corruptness, ulterior motives, or deceitfulness, but our acts of faith must be rooted in the Gospels, prophetic words from the Holy Spirit, and we must have an attitude of humility that this is not our message but God's message.

Verses 5-7

In verses 5-7, Paul continues to make known God's will must be at the center of our thoughts, actions, and deeds. Paul also uses the analogy of a nursing mother who nurtures and cares for her child with gentleness. Even though Paul can be quite stern with his words at times in his letters, we see him take a different approach. This was a common analogy of philosophers at the time as they claimed their words and ideas were supposed to be stern warnings to reform someone's perspective but also bring about a better, sustainable life for them as well like a mother's guidance for her child.

Verses 8-12

The remaining verses in this section of Paul's letter discuss the importance of caring for one another and working together. In verse 8, he talks about how wonderful it is to share each other's lives with one another as it teaches us to care about one another and develop compassion for each other's hardships and trials. Verse 12 reads, "We appealed to you, encouraged you, and pleaded with you to live lives worthy of the God who is calling you into his own kingdom and glory" (CEB 1 Thess. 2:12). God invites us to be a part of the good news and the love of the Gospel as Jesus said today in Matthew 22. We invite one another to be in a part of a beloved community that nurtures, cares, and develops compassion towards one another. In times such as these, it is important for us to remember we must look after each other and that this is part of our calling as a Christian community. This lesson is particularly important on Reformation Sunday.

We celebrate Reformation Sunday in the United Methodist Church as a reminder to the works of Martin Luther. Much like John Wesley, Martin Luther hoped to reform Catholicism instead of forming an entirely new denomination. He posted his 95 theses in hope to remind people of the core tenants of their faith. He felt the Catholic church had become too focused on the institution and their own individualized faith and completely left the people out to dry. The Gospel is meant to transform people's lives to bring about a more holistic, community minded perspective where we see one another's humanity and love our neighbors. The good news calls us to be hopeful and pursue the works of justice through our faith no matter the opposition we face. Luther wanted others to hear this and be able to read this message on their own in their own

language, through their own people, and did not want the Church to remain so rigid in their understanding of the Word and the traditions they continued to build.

There is not a doubt in my mind that the same Spirit that led Luther to nail the 95 theses and led our early Methodist leaders like John and Wesley, Rev. Richard Allen, Francis Asbury, and Susanna Wesley as they brought forth a fervent hope and blessed assurance to reform the stagnant, dry traditions of the Anglican church. Wesley had no intention of creating a new denomination and quite honestly opposed American Methodism in his final days, but Wesley, just like Luther, understood we were not fully living into the Spirit of the Gospel by not paying attention to the needs of the poor, loving the outcasts and marginalized of society, and failing to deliver a message to the people rooted in the tenants of our faith.

Many would argue we are in need of a new Reformation today in the United Methodist Church. Don't worry I am not going to nail my propositions to the doors of our churches or the parsonage, but I do want us to reflect on our institution for a moment. How can we build a more fruitful missions and services in our district and our community? This is not a question so our membership and funds will rise. It is not a question posed so we feel better about ourselves by joining a social movement relevant to today. It is not about showing and promoting our own ideas, intellect, or programs. But it is about preaching the good news to the people and building the Kingdom of God to make this world a better place. It is about preaching and living a message rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, we do not do this alone and I encourage each of you individually and collectively to take up the cross and boldly proclaim our faith in a day and age of injustice and hardship.

As we approach the Advent season and anxiously anticipate the birth of the good news, let us look to one another for hope and encouragement. As Covid cases continue to rise in our neighboring counties, may we continue to show compassion and empathy towards all those impacted by the virus. As we discern as United Methodists what is best for our denomination, may we continue to prayerfully lean on one another and practice the love of the gospel to bring about a better world than the world we were born into. May we press on with blessed assurance and hope in our hearts knowing our God calls us to new beginnings and calls us to reform our hearts, our minds, and our actions as we open our doors to welcome all who are weary. Amen.